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September 2, 2022 Edition

When schools closed due to COVID-19, IDRA immediately responded to educators and families so students could continue learning. We launched Learning Goes On to provide materials, webinars, and other information and resources. This work continues because, although the closures have ended, educators and students are still facing its impact.



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More resources and training for teachers, school administrators, families and communities are on our [Learning Goes On website](#). See [Spanish-language version](#) of this edition.

Education Policy

Federal Student Loan Changes Meant to Address Debt Crisis

By Morgan Craven, J.D.

Even as the cost of a college education **increased dramatically** over the past several decades, federal financial support for students – particularly those from families with limited wealth and income – failed to keep up. Students leaving institutions of higher education (some without completing their degrees) are entering the work-world saddled with debt. **Analyses show that student debt contributes to the racial wealth gap**, as Black borrowers are more likely to take on and hold educational debt. Additionally, the cost of post-secondary opportunities **prevents many young people** from enrolling in and completing college.



This month, the **Biden Administration announced** it would take action to address the student debt crisis by:

- Forgiving \$20,000 of student loan debt for Pell grant recipients and \$10,000 for non-Pell borrowers who make less than \$125,000 (or less than \$250,00 as a married couple);
- Extending the pause on student loan repayments that began during the COVID-19 pandemic through December 31, 2022;
- Proposing changes to minimum monthly loan payments for borrowers with limited incomes;
- Working to make permanent improvements to the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program for professionals that work in the non-profit and public sectors; and
- Seeking to increase Pell grants and make community college free.

The federal emergency extension, loan forgiveness and other actions will certainly help some who have educational debt and those who want to attend college. Still, much more can be done to ensure fair college access for all.

In addition to tackling higher education affordability, we must ensure early childhood and K-12 schools are preparing all students to access and succeed in college through rigorous coursework, individualized college counseling supports, and welcoming and culturally-sustaining curriculum and instruction.

We must also tackle the deep economic inequities that contribute to poorly- and inequitably-funded schools. These economic inequities – **perpetuated by policies** that promoted housing segregation, restricted access to jobs, and limited investments in communities of color – result in differences in access to educational opportunities. These differences are particularly stark for students of color and students from families with limited economic means – the very same students disproportionately impacted by the student debt crisis. For more

information, please see our newest brief: [How Texas Schools are Funded, and Why That Matters to Collective Success](#).

Learn more about [IDRA's work to ensure college access and success](#) and our research and policy positions around [fair school funding](#).

Please [join us as we fight to ensure excellent educational opportunities](#) for students across the U.S. South.



Education Practice

Challenges to Implementing Texas HB 4545 Tutoring Requirements for Accelerated Learning

Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., & Lizdelia Piñón, Ed.D.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all students' learning. In response, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill 4545 to address accelerated learning for Texas students in third grade and up. Yet districts, educators, education partners and parents report difficulty implementing the bill.



HB 4545 imposed new accelerated learning requirements for students who did not perform satisfactorily on their 2021 STAAR tests in third through eighth grade or on their high school STAAR end-of-course exams.

Eligible students must either:

- Be assigned a certified master, exemplary or recognized teacher; or
- Complete 30 hours of tutoring in small groups for each STAAR exam the student failed.

For example, a seventh-grade student who did not meet expectations on their reading and math STAAR exams must complete 60 hours of tutoring outside of core class time.

Many districts report that, while embedded tutoring offers benefits, HB 4545 creates more hurdles to student success and teachers' instructional and preparation time. Educators, parents and other experts expressed concerns to

the Texas Legislature that HB 4545 strains students' learning time and adds to staffing challenges.

The bill also relies on a "one size fits all" approach of small-group, intensive tutoring instead of a broader array of student supports and interventions to address students' learning needs. The flat tutoring hour requirement does not account for how many or which questions a student missed on the state exam.

What can parents do if they have concerns about and/or questions about HB 4545?

As this new school begins, the partnership between families and schools is of the utmost importance. Many parents are asking school districts and school leaders more specific questions about HB 4545 and what educators will be doing to help their child's learning recovery.

Parents can get answers on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) website. TEA has provided [HB 4545 frequently asked questions](#) and videos to help answer many of those questions. Also see TEA's [High Impact Tutoring Toolkit](#).

Overall, schools need more flexibility, support and guidance to accomplish the goals of high-impact tutoring for accelerated learning.



Webinar September 20

A promotional poster for a national webinar. The left side features a photograph of a classroom with students at desks and a teacher at the front. The right side has a dark blue background with white and yellow text. At the top right, a yellow banner says 'National Webinar'. The main title is 'Community Discussion about Equity & Attendance'. Below the title, a calendar icon indicates the date 'September 20, 2022' and time '1:00 pm CT via Zoom'. A link 'https://idra.news/AttendPolicy' is provided for details. At the bottom right are logos for the 'Student Engagement and Attendance Center' and 'IDRA EAC-South'.

September 20, 2022
1:00-2:30 pm CT

Hosted by the Student Engagement and Attendance Center (SEAC) and the IDRA EAC-South

The webinar will explore a big question many state and local education agencies are considering: **How do your attendance policies, data systems and practices improve equity for students of color, students with disabilities, or other student groups who have been historically marginalized?**

This interactive webinar will feature a panel of students, families and agency staff who will use discussion prompts about authentic engagement in attendance-related practices.

[Get details](#)

Education Policy

Mask Mandate Legislation Makes It Harder for Local Schools to Keep Students and School Staff Safe

by Terrence Wilson, J.D.

Across the U.S South, several different states have passed legislation that bans the practice of requiring masks for children in schools. This legislation is proposed as a part of a larger package of [measures](#) aimed at increasing parent control in educational spaces.

These measures have been enacted despite [evidence](#) that those that wear a mask in indoor public settings have up to an 83% lower chance of testing positive for COVID-19. Specifically, researchers have [studied](#) the impact of masking in K-12 school environments and assert that consistent and correct mask use is a critical strategy for preventing the spread of COVID-19.



While COVID-19 transmission rates have declined, there are still risks of outbreaks within school communities, and these policies make it significantly harder for schools to control the spread of COVID-19.

Examples of Anti-Mask Executive and Legislative Action and Legislation

Over the last two years, governors and legislatures across the U.S. South have attempted to ban mask mandates in schools. For example, during the 2022 legislative session, leaders in Georgia passed the “Unmask GA Students Act” (GA SB514/Act 586, 2022) with Governor Brian Kemp’s full [endorsement](#). The

law prevents any local boards of education, charter school boards, local superintendents, local teachers, administrators or other school personnel from creating or enforcing any rule that requires students to wear masks, without exception.

Similarly, Governor Ron DeSantis issued an [order](#) authorizing the Florida education department to [withhold funding](#) from school districts that enact mask mandates and cited Florida's new Parents' Bill of Rights legislation (FL HB 241/Chapter No. 2021-199, 2021) prohibition on state and government institutions interfering with parents' authority to make education or healthcare decisions for their children.

Additionally, in Virginia, both Governor Glenn Youngkin and the Virginia legislature have sought to ban mask mandates. Governor Youngkin's [second executive order](#) sought to give the power to decide whether or not children must wear masks to each individual parent. Similarly, the Virginia General Assembly passed a bill that allows parents to opt their children out of school mask mandates and requires schools to stay open five days a week for in-person instruction (VA SB379, Chapter 2, 2022).

Other measures that have been enacted include an [executive order](#) by Governor Greg Abbott in Texas. Tennessee legislators passed legislation rolling back several COVID-19 protections, including placing additional requirements on schools that institute mask mandates and prohibits state money from being used for that purpose (TN SB 9014/Pub. Ch. 6, 2021). In South Carolina, legislators wrote the mask mandate ban into law via the state budget (SC HB 4100, 2021).

Legal Challenges are a Mixed Bag

Parents, school districts and advocates have challenged many of these laws in court. In Florida, advocates were unsuccessful in their challenge as, after an original ruling against this executive order, the Florida Court of Appeals [ruled](#) in the governor's favor and allowed the order to remain in place, largely upon procedural grounds. The result of this ruling was that districts like Miami-Dade public schools, the fourth largest district in the nation, and seven other school districts had money withheld. This money was later reimbursed by the Florida Department of Education and was the subject of a cease and desist [complaint](#) from the U.S. Department of Education.

In South Carolina, both the state supreme court and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit have [allowed](#) South Carolina's budget measure banning mask mandates to stand.

In Texas, a federal appeals court [allowed](#) the governor's mask mandate executive order.

Other advocates have had more success, particularly when considering the impact on the mask mandate ban on students with disabilities. In Arkansas, a federal judge struck down the 2021 law banning school mask mandates (AR SB 590/Act No. 1002, 2021) as unconstitutional (*McClane v. Hutchinson*,

2021). In Virginia, courts ruled that Governor Youngkin's executive order and Virginia's SB 739 could not be enforced against students with disabilities (*Seaman v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, 2022).

Similarly, in South Carolina advocates were able to secure an injunction against the operation of a mask mandate for students with disabilities when a judge struck down that law as unconstitutional. Similarly, in Tennessee, a federal district circuit court [allowed](#) schools to institute mask mandates.

Conclusion

While the legality of mask mandate executive orders and legislation remains up for debate, it is vital that schools continue to have the ability to make the best decisions regarding safety for their students and staff. It will be crucial for parents, communities and community-based organizations to be vigilant for the spread of COVID-19 since schools may not be in a position to take measures to prevent the spread due to executive and legislative action.

Networks

Southern Education Equity Network



As small but loud factions attack public education, students and families across the U.S. South are pushing back. IDRA's new Southern Education Equity Network (SEEN) trains and assists communities in improving education policy and practice across the South

and provides an online and mobile space for community members and coalitions to coordinate their advocacy.

Join our new SEEN site & forum

Federal Funds Community Report

Building Supportive Schools from the Ground Up

IDRA's report highlights how school districts can use federal funds to invest in strategies that ensure culturally-sustaining schools for all

students. The strategies were identified during IDRA's community sessions with young people, families, advocates and other education experts.

[See Report PDF](#)



With Amazon Smile, you can shop while raising money for a cause you care about! Visit smile.amazon.com and select IDRA as your charity. Thank you for helping IDRA support teachers and families to ensure that Learning Goes On during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond!



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IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

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